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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1885  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 001298

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [BG](#)  
SUBJECT: REFORM-MINDED GRANDEE OF FARIDPUR FACES TOUGH RACE  
AS INDEPENDENT CANDIDATE

REF: DHAKA 1286

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Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) The race for the Parliament seat representing the Faridpur district capital is a showdown between three high-profile candidates in which party allegiance is being sorely tested. It pits a close in-law of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina as the Awami League candidate versus the Jamaat-e-Islami Secretary General as the candidate for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party-led Four-Party Alliance. The central character in the contest, however, is Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf, a former Cabinet Minister who is campaigning as an independent after running afoul of the BNP leadership for challenging the autocratic ways of the party chairperson, Khaleda Zia. A pre-election reporting visit to Faridpur on December 10-11 found the Jamaat senior leader likely headed for an embarrassing loss because of strong hometown support for Kamal Yusuf.

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THE KING OF FARIDPUR (PART 1)  
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¶2. (SBU) The voters of Faridpur-3 have elected Chowdhury Kamal Ibne Yusuf to Parliament in five straight elections, beginning in 1979 and most recently in 2001. He was a rare BNP representative in a region southwest of Dhaka known as an Awami League stronghold. His forefathers were zamindars, or feudal landlords, during the British Raj. His father, a prominent politician in the Muslim League, was widely admired for helping the poor in times of need. Although Kamal Yusuf and his six brothers have long since moved to Dhaka, the family continues to own factories and land in Faridpur and maintains an imposing ancestral compound in the middle of town. The property is dominated by a two-story, white-with-orange-trim mansion built in 1894, a family mosque, and a large stone monument marking the grave of Kamal Yusuf's grandfather. A new annex flanks the mansion and is where the family receives a steady stream of visitors.

¶3. (C) In 1991, Kamal Ibne Yusuf was named Minister for Health in the BNP Cabinet led by then-Prime Minister Khaleda Zia; during her second administration in 2001-2006 he was Minister for Food and Disaster Management. A military-backed Caretaker Government postponed elections in January 2007 and

launched an anti-corruption drive that led to charges against Zia and Sheikh Hasina. Kamal Yusuf subsequently became a key member of a loose-knit group of BNP reformers seeking to make the party more democratic; many believe he sided with reformists in part to protect his family from possible retribution from the military-supported Caretaker Government. After Zia got out of jail on bail in September 2008 to lead her party in the December 29 Parliamentary elections, Kamal Yusuf was among several reformers denied nominations on the Four-Party Alliance slate. Although pressure from Jamaat-e-Islami to nominate Secretary General Ali Ahsan Mohammad Mojaheed as the Alliance candidate for Faridpur-3 no doubt was a factor, so too was Kamal Yusuf's seeming disloyalty to Zia. "People are really shocked," Kamal Yusuf, who had worked hard to get back in Zia's good graces, told PolOff from the living room of his compound annex. "Why have I been sacrificed?"

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THE CHALLENGERS  
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¶4. (C) The snub to Kamal Yusuf provided an opening for Awami League candidate Khandokar Mosharraf Hossain. Sitting in the generous shade of a sobeda tree behind his family home, dressed in a white punjabi shirt splattered with red juice stains from the betel nut he chews, Mosharraf Hossain was in an upbeat mood. Kamal Yusuf, he said, "used to dominate politics. He's an underdog right now."

¶5. (C) Mosharraf Hossain's main credential is his relationship as an in-law to Awami League President Sheikh Hasina -- his only son is married to her only daughter. A local academic and several journalists told PolOff the

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relationship was the primary factor in Mosharraf Hossain's favor. They noted he had not maintained close contact with the constituency during his many years living abroad as a United Nations civil engineer and in Dhaka. While the candidate himself acknowledged being "close to power" helped his campaign, he also argued he could win on the "main issue" of inflation. He said people in his constituency were fed up with high prices during the Caretaker Government. He argued only an Awami League victory could bring back the relatively low commodity prices of 1996-2001, the last time the party was in power.

¶6. (C) The prospects for the other major challenger, Mojaheed of Jamaat-e-Islami, are faint even though he is the Four-Party Alliance standard bearer. Local journalists said Mojaheed received little more than 12,000 votes in 1996, when he was wiped out by Kamal Yusuf. They said sentiment runs strong against Jamaat and Mojaheed in particular, who is believed by many in Faridpur to have been involved in atrocities during Bangladesh's independence war. (Note: Jamaat leaders in Faridpur dismiss such talk, noting no case has ever been filed against Mojaheed. End note.) In street interviews with several dozen Faridpur residents, locally employed EmbOff found only two who supported Jamaat, including one rickshaw-wallah who sang the party's praises while wiping sweat off his forehead and blowing his nose into the street at the end of a particularly exhausting trip.

¶7. (C) Arif Islam, the general secretary of the Faridpur Press Club, said local people were dismayed when up to 1,000 or more of Mojaheed's supporters joined him December 3 in a procession to his mother's grave in a show of political strength. (Note: Estimates of the crowd size varied widely. The Superintendent of Police said about 100 people participated, while local Jamaat officials estimated several thousand participated. End note.) Delowar Hossain, the head of Jamaat in Faridpur District, insisted all of the participants were from Faridpur despite allegations that many came from elsewhere in Bangladesh. He acknowledged, however, that many local people were nervous about Jamaat and said his

party would stress Mojaheed was the candidate of the Four-Party Alliance and not just the Islamist party. This distinction will be difficult as the icon next to Mojaheed's name on the ballot will be a scale, the Jamaat symbol.

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THE KING OF FARIDPUR (PART 2)  
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18. (C) The main question is whether Mojaheed as the Four-Party Alliance candidate can siphon enough votes from Kamal Yusuf to allow the Awami League's Mosharraf Hossain to squeak by to victory. Arif and others said they expected a close race. One problem for Kamal Yusuf is that the well-known BNP symbol of a rice sheaf will not be on the ballot beside his name for the first time. Instead, his icon will be a water pitcher, which may prove confusing to the many illiterate voters who identify candidates by ballot symbols. He also faces questions about his effectiveness as Parliamentarian. Wali Newza, the local reporter for the small but influential English-language newspaper The New Age, said Kamal Yusuf failed to secure a widely desired bridge across the Padma River to shorten transportation time between Dhaka and Faridpur; erosion along the river's banks also continued to be a major problem during his tenure.

19. (C) Still, Mosharraf Hossain has a long distance to make up, having lost to Kamal Yusuf by 45,000 votes in 2001 out of more than 200,000 cast. Even though the top two BNP leaders in Faridpur support Mojaheed as the Four-Party Alliance candidate, many other local BNP officers are openly backing Kamal Yusuf. Indeed, during a recent visit to his home by PolOff, senior leaders of the party's local youth, women's and labor wings were all in attendance. Kamal Yusuf "is a great leader," said Mahbubul Hassan Pinku, senior vice president of the Faridpur BNP youth wing. "He has done a lot for the people," he added, prompting Kamal Yusuf to cite his role in the construction of local bridges, roads, culverts, colleges and hospitals. The candidate also has a small army of relatives -- six brothers and their many sons and daughters -- who are tromping around Faridpur on his behalf, an important resource given the high regard many locals have for the family. The importance of retail politics also was on display during PolOff's two visits to Kamal Yusuf's compound.

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Visitors from all walks of life came to pay their respects; at one point about 100 people sat on plastic chairs in a small courtyard listening to a few brief testimonials and a five-minute speech from the candidate before receiving plates piled high with savory rice.

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CONCLUSION: BANGLADESHI POLITICS IS PERSONAL  
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110. (C) Former U.S. House Speaker Thomas "Tip" O'Neil famously said all politics is local; the Faridpur corollary is all politics is personal. Despite being denied a nomination by his party, local grandee Kamal Yusuf remains a strong candidate for the Faridpur-3 seat in Parliament as an independent. A win would be a personal victory for Kamal Yusuf as well as a devastating blow to Jamaat, which lobbied hard to get the Four-Party Alliance nomination for its Secretary General. But it would not be interpreted as a mandate for democratic change. Kamal Yusuf himself would like to return to the BNP should he win, a move that would require renewed allegiance to Khaleda Zia and acknowledgement of her authoritarian grip on the party.

MORIARTY